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Epidemiology of Foodborne Outbreaks of Undetermined Etiology, FoodNet Sites, 2001-2004

Biography:

Cynthia is an ASPH/FSIS Fellow assigned to the Foodborne Diseases Active Surveillance Network (FoodNet), part of the Emerging Infections Program at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. She holds a BSPH from UNC-Chapel Hill and a MHS from Johns Hopkins School of Hygiene & Public Health. Before joining FoodNet, she worked for the Arizona Department of Health Services.

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Background: Annually, an estimated 62 million cases of acute foodborne gastroenteritis in the US are due to undetermined etiologies. Outbreak investigations serve an important role in understanding the epidemiology of foodborne pathogens.

Methods: We analyzed data from CDC's national electronic Foodborne Outbreak Reporting System (eFORS) with supplemental outbreak forms completed by Foodborne Diseases Active Surveillance Network (FoodNet) sites since 2001 to assess barriers to outbreak investigations. CDC criteria were used to define etiologies.

Results: A total of 914 outbreaks were reported via eFORS in FoodNet sites; 859 (94%) were linked to supplemental forms. Of these, 374 (44%) outbreaks had an undetermined etiology. Among outbreaks of undetermined etiology, only 107 (29%) outbreaks had stool specimens collected from ≥ 2 persons. Among outbreaks with stools collected from ≥ 2 persons, only 23 (21%) outbreaks had an investigation

begun within one week of outbreak onset, stool samples collected within one week of onset of first patient illness, and an epidemiological analytic study performed. Overall, only 6% of outbreaks of undetermined etiology appeared to have an investigation begin in a timely manner with adequate number of patients examined by stool culture quickly, and an analytical study performed.

Conclusion: In 94% of foodborne disease outbreaks of undetermined etiology a thorough investigation was not performed promptly, most commonly because 71% of outbreaks had inadequate specimen collection. Physicians play a vital role in an outbreak investigation by promptly collecting specimens and reporting suspected outbreaks to health departments. These are important steps to ensure a successful investigation.

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